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DOI:

[10.1177/1350506810394613](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506810394613)

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Citation for published version (APA):

Scharff, C. (2011). Disarticulating feminism: Individualization, neoliberalism and the othering of 'Muslim women'. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 18(2), 119-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506810394613>

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Disarticulating Feminism: Individualisation, neoliberalism and the othering of “Muslim women”

Dr Christina Scharff

Lecturer in Culture, Media and Creative Industries

Email christina.scharff@kcl.ac.uk

Tel +44 (0)20 7848 1854

King's College London

Culture, Media and Creative Industries

King's College London

9D Chesham Building

Strand Campus

London

WC2R 2LS

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Please cite as Scharff, C. (2011). "Disarticulating Feminism: Individualization, neoliberalism and the othering of 'Muslim women'." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18(2): 119-134.

IMPORTANT: When referring to this paper, please check the page numbers in the journal published version and cite these.

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Abstract:

In the cultural era of postfeminism, neoliberalism and individualisation, feminism is not an identity easily claimed. This article discusses the findings of a qualitative study on young women’s engagements with feminism in Britain and Germany. In particular, it focuses on two processes through which feminism was disarticulated: individualisation and the othering of Muslim women. Research participants showed awareness of gender inequalities, but argued that they could navigate structural constraints individually and self-responsibly. As the last section of this article shows, the respondents’ self-presentation as empowered contrasted sharply with the portrayal of ‘other’ women as victims of patriarchal oppression. The article concludes by demonstrating that the respondents’ construction of empowered selves is constituted by the othering of Muslim women.

Keywords: feminist dis-identification; individualisation; neoliberalism; othering of Muslim women

Feminism represents a contested terrain for young women in western Europe. While feminist activism is ongoing - also amongst young women - (Dean, 2010; Eismann, 2007), research suggests that feminism is overwhelmingly unpopular, indeed ‘almost hated’ (McRobbie, 2003:130; Aapola et al., 2005; Rich, 2005; Rúðólfssdóttir and Jolliffe, 2008). This article discusses the findings of a qualitative study on young women’s engagements with feminism in Britain and Germany. Given that three-quarters of the research participants dis-identified with feminism, the article will shed light on two processes through which feminism was disarticulated: the process of individualisation and the process of othering. Respondents used individualist rhetoric to portray themselves as autonomous individuals who are not in need of feminism. They also distanced themselves from feminism by portraying other, namely “Muslim women”, as victims of patriarchal oppression. I will problematise the trope of “the oppressed Muslim woman” and conclude by demonstrating that the research participants’ self-representation as empowered is intertwined with the othering of Muslim women.

The literature on young women's relationship with feminism provides a variety of explanations for young women's dis-identification with feminism. Key themes revolve around the common assumption that gender equality has been achieved; the postfeminist cultural climate; feminism's exclusionary tendencies; and the socio-cultural currents of neoliberalism and individualisation. Discussing commonly held views about gender equality, Sharpe (2001: 179) argues that 'the prevalent rhetoric around "equality" lulls young women into a false sense that more has been achieved than is the case, and creates a discrepancy between feminism and young women who believe that improvements in women's lives have rendered feminism redundant' (also see Jowett, 2004). The alleged redundancy of feminism is also a theme in discussions about postfeminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007). McRobbie foregrounds the complex relationship between feminism and postfeminism by arguing that feminism is simultaneously taken into account *and* repudiated. Adopting the critical lens of postfeminism, young women's repudiation of feminism can be regarded as reflecting the "double entanglement" (McRobbie, 2003: 130) where feminism has achieved Gramscian common sense and, as a consequence, is fiercely rejected.

Alongside postfeminism, young women's positionings on various axes of difference intersect with their engagement with feminism. Aapola et al. (2005) point to the exclusionary tendencies of feminism and suggest that the image of feminists as predominantly white, middle-class, middle-aged, able-bodied and heterosexual prevents young women from a variety of backgrounds to identify with the women's movement. Indeed, research with women from various backgrounds demonstrates that race, class and sexuality mediate negotiations of feminism (Aronson, 2003; Denner, 2001; Skeggs, 1997). Conducting interviews with a diverse group of young women in the US, Aronson (2003: 919) shows that the women of colour she interviewed were supportive of equality, but states that most of them 'distanced

themselves from the identity of feminist, suggesting that the intuitional supports for feminism may be more appealing or available to white women'.

Research on young women's engagements with feminism has also pointed to the prevalence of neoliberal discourses which dissolve the appeal of joining collective political struggles. The term neoliberalism is used variously, not only across time and space (Ong, 2006) but also within different political and disciplinary contexts. This article draws on Foucauldian approaches to neoliberalism (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008) that understand it as 'a mentality of government' (Rose, 1992: 145) which also entails a 'reorganization of programmes for the government of personal life' (Rose and Miller, 1992: 200). Government, in this context, denotes various ways in which the self has become linked to power, where power is understood as working through, and not against, subjectivity. Rose (1992: 162) regards neoliberalism as closely linked to the tradition and rationalities of liberal government in western democracies which 'have always been concerned with internalising their authority in citizens through inspiring, encouraging and inaugurating programmes and techniques that will simultaneously "autonomize" and "responsibilize" subjects'.

Hughes' (2005) study demonstrates that neoliberal ideology is a factor preventing young women from embracing feminist politics. Asking young Australian women who had just started a women's studies programme about their attitudes towards feminism, Hughes (2005: 45) found that the use of the term feminism was resisted 'because it is synonymous with analysing the systemic structural constraints which limit "choice", "individual freedom" and "rights"' (also see Bulbeck, 2001). The reluctance to acknowledge structural constraints and orientation towards the values of choice and freedom suggest a link between neoliberalism and feminist dis-identification.

In addition, processes of individualisation create a climate in which structural inequalities are regarded as individual problems. Exploring feminist consciousness in ten

white middle-class women in Britain, Rich (2005) found that individual achievement is believed to be sufficient to overcome social constraints. These empirical observations resonate with broader sociological arguments about individualisation (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1991) and more critical perspectives on processes of individualisation in particular (Bauman, 2000, 2001; McRobbie, 2009). Writing about the contemporary era, Bauman argues that '[i]ndividualization is a fate, not a choice' and that refusal to participate in the 'individualizing game is emphatically *not* on the agenda' (2000: 34; emphasis in original). 'Everything [...]', he states, 'is now down to the individual' (2000: 62); the conditions in which individuals live, their experiences and narratives undergo a relentless process of individualisation. Discussing *The Aftermath of Feminism*, McRobbie (2009: 16) draws on Bauman's arguments to develop the concept of 'female individualisation'. Examining young women's repudiation of feminism, she claims that feminism has been replaced with 'aggressive individualism' (2009: 5).

This article furthers our understanding of young women's engagements with feminism by discussing empirical data produced in a qualitative study. The study, which was conducted between 2006 and 2007, was based on forty semi-structured interviews with women who were aged 18-35. The research participants had different sexual orientations, socio-economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. In Germany, two respondents identified as black, twelve as white, two as mixed-race, one as German and Korean, and three as German and Turkish. In Britain, I spoke to three women who described themselves as mixed-race, three as Asian, two as black and twelve as white. Topics that were explicitly addressed ranged from the participants' opinions on gender roles and the state of gender (in)equality, to attitudes towards, and feelings about, feminism. Following Butler's (1992) considerations, the study regarded 'feminism' as contingent to avoid rigid and potentially exclusionary definitions of the term. The broader research explored various themes - postfeminism, heteronormativity,

and difference - in the context of feminist dis-identification (Author, 2011). The analysis presented here will focus on individualisation and the construction of cultural others.

This article will begin with a discussion of individualisation which constituted one process through which feminism was disarticulated. The first and second sections will examine two dimensions of the process of individualisation: un-gendered individualisation (section one) and responsible, autonomous individualisation (section two). Contrary to claims made in the existing literature, the first section will demonstrate that research respondents were aware of persisting gender inequalities, but used individualist narratives to construct themselves as individuals, rather than ‘women’, and to argue that there was no need for feminism in their lives. The second section will explore the workings of responsible, autonomous individualisation in the rejection of feminism. Paying particular attention to the subject positions that individualist and neoliberal rhetoric carve out for young women, I will show that their self-identification as empowered subjects of social change (McRobbie, 2009), who self-responsibly deal with various forms of oppression, meant that feminism was rarely claimed. The third and last section of the article explores the second process through which feminism is disarticulated: the othering of Muslim women. Research participants characterised Muslim women as passive victims of patriarchal oppression. Problematising various aspects of the figure of “the subordinate Muslim woman”, such as the production of neo-colonial forms of knowledge, I will conclude by arguing that the construction of the other woman as powerless was not a tangential phenomenon, but was central to maintaining the intelligibility of the research participants’ positioning as western empowered individuals.

Un-gendered individualisation: “I don’t think it’s about being a woman; it’s an individual thing!”

Research participants showed awareness of persisting gender inequalities. However, they rarely offered a critical account of gender relations, especially if it involved a perspective that highlighted how social norms disadvantaged women. Louisa¹ shared her experiences of working in a high-powered job as a young woman. She reported difficulties in gaining respect which ‘really annoyed her’. Louisa continued by arguing that the ‘man/woman thing’ irritated her less than her lack of work experience as a young employee: ‘I would find it really interesting to see, if I had work experience, whether I would have the same difficulties’. I subsequently inquired whether she ever discussed these issues with her female colleagues to which she replied: ‘We talk about it, that one is not really being understood, but not directly about, that it’s because we are women, more like, because we don’t have any work experience, or because we are younger’. Age and lack of experience figure as explanations for feelings of powerlessness at the workplace. Being female is mentioned as a possible variable, but simultaneously rendered less relevant.

An analogous argumentative pattern occurred several times. Louisa discussed gender inequalities by acknowledging the gender pay gap and the small number of female managers in her company. This awareness did however not translate into a critique of gender discrimination in the workplace. Instead, Louisa argued that her company was progressive: ‘[...] in comparison to other jobs, where I was, it [my company] is much more liberal, I mean, just the fact that we are more women in my office, is a sign that there are ways to advance in your career’. Paradoxically, Louisa’s earlier critical analysis of gender relations in her workplace is being replaced with a characterisation of her employer as progressive. I suggest that Louisa’s account works because it elides the very issues at stake in her initial complaint. Louisa started by lamenting the lack of respect for young, female employees. Towards the end

of the narrative, however, the sheer number of junior female members of staff is taken as a sign for progress. Louisa is seemingly happy to regard age and lack of work experience as possible explanations for her difficulties in the workplace. In contrast, the potential significance of gender is diminished.

Louisa's reference to the gender pay gap shows that she was aware of gender inequalities. Indeed, gender discrimination at the workplace was referred to in nearly all interviews (38 out of 40). Vicky's statement was emblematic: 'When I think of gender equality I think of it in terms of the workplace'. By mentioning the workplace, gender inequalities were overwhelmingly located in the public sphere. This means that private concerns were not regarded as political, foreclosing a discussion of more intimate issues in relation to feminism (Pilcher, 1998). Equally important, the research participants' accounts contradict existing arguments that young women reject feminism because they believe equality has been achieved. The respondents' awareness of gender inequalities in the workplace demonstrates that the absence of a persistently critical analysis of gender relations cannot be explained by young women's supposed belief in the existence of gender equality.

While almost all interviewees were aware of gender inequalities, twelve respondents claimed they had never personally experienced any form of discrimination. Clarissa stated that 'I've always been taught to – to do whatever I want re- you know, be – not necessarily because I'm a women but because I'm an individual, you know and – and no-one's ever sort of said to me you can't do that because you're a woman. So I haven't really had any negative experiences because of my gender'. Clarissa's account is suffused with individualist statements. She is 'an individual' and does whatever she wants to do. Her gender has never imposed any limitations on her ability to act freely. Indeed, individualist language was woven through the narratives of numerous research participants. Christine was also conscious of persisting gender inequalities, but stated: 'I feel that I can do anything I want to as a woman,

so I feel I have the choices open to me'. Similar to Clarissa, Christine claims she can do anything. The vocabulary of having all choices open indicates unlimited individuality and freedom, reflecting broader socio-cultural trends of individualisation.

Bauman (2001: 9) holds that the individualisation of narratives 'suppresses (prevents from articulation) the possibility of tracking down the links connecting individual fate to the ways and means by which society as a whole operates; [...]'. As the research participants' acknowledgement of the gender pay gap demonstrates, the respondents are gender aware and yet this awareness is undone through the process of un-gendered individualisation. The gender pay gap and experiences at the workplace are not related to gender inequalities because the participants present themselves as individuals, rather than male or female. In discussing the *Aftermath of Feminism*, McRobbie (2009: 5) develops the concept of female individualisation to make the broader argument that feminism has been replaced with 'aggressive individualism' (amongst other things). The replacement of feminism through individualist rhetoric can be observed in Christine's statement. She argued that she would not call herself a feminist because:

I have opinions on what is male and what is female, but I really think that actually, people are individuals, there are traits amongst gender groups, but as much – we are also individuals, so, I don't want to, I don't mind exploring that, but I don't want to be fixed with a group of erm thinking of, constantly thinking about women.

While Christine alludes to differences amongst men and women, she undoes the need for feminism by using individualist and un-gendered rhetoric; indeed, an engagement with feminism is disputed because 'we are also individuals'.

The significance of un-gendered individualisation in the undoing of feminism becomes even more apparent when bringing to mind young women's positioning as 'privileged subjects of social change' (McRobbie, 2009: 15) and the connections between the category 'young woman' as well as the notions of 'freedom' and 'choice'. According to

McRobbie, this hopeful positioning of young women as able and independent beings comes at the cost of giving up feminist politics. Individualist discourses of ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ are deployed ‘as a kind of substitute for feminism’ (2009: 1), rendering feminism redundant. The connection between youth, femininity, and a rhetoric of individualism and choice provides a critical perspective on the research participants’ self-representation as empowered and free beings who are no longer in need of feminism. Resonating with Bauman’s critical analysis of individualisation, it appears that young women are obliged to be free and able, and to discard feminism on the very basis of personal empowerment.

McRobbie (2009: 49) adds a further critical dimension to the individualisation of experiences by arguing that (young) women ‘are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism’. She draws attention to reinstituted forms of sexual hierarchy, and the dividing of women along broader lines of oppression which foreclose the possibility of collective political struggle. My discursive analysis (Edely and Wetherell, 2001) of the research participants’ interviews illustrates a further way in which young women are disempowered by individualisation. Individualist statements not only elide the regulatory force of norms, but can actively contribute to their reinforcement.

Sabrina stated that she imagined ‘really sort of butch lesbians when I think of feminism’ⁱⁱ. When I inquired into her feelings about butch looking women, she said:

I kind of think if that’s how they want to look then fair enough er, but I personally wouldn’t choose to look like that and you know, it’s up – it’s up to everyone how they want to dress and how they want to look but if I was that person I would not look like that [...].

Sabrina vacillates between passing judgment on non-normative appearances by claiming that she does not find them desirable on the one hand, and portraying herself as an open-minded person who does not care about other people’s style of clothing, on the other. Sabrina is confronted with the dilemma of passing judgement and not wanting to do so. She seeks to

resolve this conflict by using individualist rhetoric. The individualism in her statement functions as a disclaimer in that it enables her to convey normative and discriminatory views – butch lesbians dress badly – while simultaneously facilitating an allegiance to open-mindedness and tolerance. Sabrina gets her message across, without being overtly offensive. Key to her success in doing so is the use of individualist rhetoric, illustrating how individualism operates at the level of talk to reinforce norms and dominant perceptions.

Individualist talk evades political discussions because everything is cloaked in the seeming neutrality of it only being an individual's opinion. However, one could argue that this supposed neutrality emerges exactly from the normativity of such statements – as that which does not have to be named or made explicit, thereby adding to the regulatory force of seemingly apolitical, individual views. Sabrina's statement can only be perceived as individualist because it is made from a normative, apparently neutral position, further contributing to the regulatory power of such accounts. Reading and analysing the interviews, I got the impression that anything could be said under the proviso that 'this is just my own opinion'. Carla claimed: 'As long as people are happy they can do whatever they want, basically that's how I feel'. Similarly, Ulla held that 'everybody should do what he wants to do'. There seems to be an imperative to let everybody (or only men?) do what they want to do. However, as Sabrina's statement demonstrates, this imperative becomes intermeshed with a normative individualism – normative both in the Bauman sense of not having a choice but to be individualist, but also in the sense of reinstating normative views through the use of individualist rhetoric.

Brown's (2006) insightful analysis of tolerance talk illustrates the normative workings of such statements. Suggesting that there has been a renaissance in tolerance talk since the mid-1980s, Brown studies its social and political effects. She observes that '[a]most all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being

tolerated, [...]’ (2006: 14) which leads her to an understanding of tolerance as ‘a mode of late modern governmentality that iterates the normalcy of the powerful and the deviance of the marginal [...]’ (2006: 8). Tolerance constitutes a practice of power and regulation by drawing a line between the tolerable and the intolerable. This process is at play in Sabrina’s statement where butch looks are marked as deviant by virtue of being tolerated. Importantly, Brown argues that tolerance is a discourse of depoliticization and places it in the context of broader depoliticizing social currents, such as individualism, neoliberalism, and the culturalisation of politics. Having discussed un-gendered individualisation in this section, I will now explore the depoliticizing effects of neoliberalism to discuss the dimension of responsible individualisation.

Responsible individualisation: becoming an autonomous subject

While individualism was prominent in the undoing of feminism, discourses of ‘choice’ also emerged from various accounts, such as Christine’s statement of having ‘all the choices’ open to her (discussed above). Neoliberal forms of government through regulated choices became apparent in Miranda’s statement about being ‘all for cosmetic surgery’:

I will definitely have a boob job once I have had kids, and I will definitely have Botox once I start getting wrinkles because I don’t want to look old, and, I will I don’t know, I don’t think I will have liposuction, because that’s just lazy, because you can go on a diet and go to the gym.

Miranda’s decision to undergo cosmetic surgery in the future is self-aware and self-determined: she is the one who wants to have a ‘boob job’ and ‘Botox’; nobody tells her to do so. Her choices however are highly regulated in that they enable Miranda to adhere to prevalent ideals of female beauty. Miranda does not need anybody to tell her what to do; she makes the ‘right’ (i.e. normative) choices independently. Indeed, she aspires to and desires normative looks, which illustrates the workings of power through, and not against, the subject. Moreover, the last sentence of Miranda’s statement points to a further dimension of neoliberal

government, namely responsabilization. Miranda is not going to have liposuction, because ‘that’s just lazy’. Given that the moral autonomy of neoliberal subjects is ‘measured by the capacity for “self-care” -- the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions’ (Brown, 2003: paragraph 15), Miranda’s support for dieting and exercise fully conforms to a neoliberal form of government through responsabilization. She is not going to have liposuction because she proclaims the more responsible choice of a strict dieting and exercising regime.

In the context of feminist dis-identification, the neoliberal notions of choice and personal responsibility work to undo feminist claims because their emphasis on an autonomous and responsible individualism does not sit well with a perceived collectivism of feminist activism and its focus on structural constraints. Several respondents associated feminism with the 1960s and 1970s and linked it to collective forms of protest. Christine said that she connected feminism with protest, amongst other things: ‘Weirdly, I think of protests, perhaps from, you know, I am thinking of images from the seventies’. The mention of ‘protest’ and ‘the seventies’ evokes particular images of outdated collective struggle that differ from the pronounced individualism in the research participants’ talk.

Indeed, the notion of collective struggle becomes almost meaningless in this context where structural constraints are undone through the process of responsible, autonomous individualisation. More importantly, I argue that collective forms of organising lose their appeal because they seem to prevent individuals from acting as responsible subjects: if to be a good person involves taking good care of the self through individualist acts, critical analyses of structural constraints and forms of collective organising do not allow for the individual to prove herself as an autonomous, and therefore moral being. To attribute one’s happiness and misery to broader social and political forces is decisively not on the agenda because it robs the individual from the opportunity to fashion herself as a morally good person. To put it

differently, I argue that collective, political struggle is unpopular because a responsible and autonomous subject navigates inequalities and opportunities individually and without the help of collectivities. I suggest that we should understand the research participants' reluctance to engage in a critical analysis of unequal gender relations as something that threatens their positioning as self-determined, empowered and free subjects.

I interpret Carrie's statement on why she would rather 'hold tight and stand strong' than 'going off and rioting' as indicating a preference for being a responsible individual over an 'angry, rioting woman'. Talking about her experience of being the only woman who worked with a group of six boys at a night club, Carrie stated:

They [the boys] just make me feel bad as a girl because they don't see what they are doing or maybe they do and they want to pick on me because I am a woman. But I am just going to hold tight and stand strong because I know that eventually they have got a lot of respect for the other things that I do [...] and you know, they resent me being a woman. And you know, I just have to hold tight and stand strong. There is not much point in going off and rioting about it, you just have to be strong about it and do it.

Similar to her peers, Carrie demonstrates feminist awareness because she knows that the boys resent her as a woman. She is not suffering from 'false consciousness' or lulled into a false sense of equality (Sharpe, 2001). To the contrary, she comes across as self-determined, in control and well aware. But rather than claiming feminism as one possible mode of understanding and dealing with the resentment she experiences at the workplace, Carrie advocates a responsible and autonomous individualism. She is determined to 'hold tight and stand strong' and regards individual hard work as a key to success. According to Carrie, 'there is not much point in going off and rioting about it' - you have to 'just do it'.

Carrie uses the phrase of 'holding tight and standing strong' several times in this statement; its reiteration reveals the performative character of her account which figures not only as a rejection of feminism, but simultaneously as the production of an autonomous, responsible and neoliberal self. Cronin (2000) illustrates the mutually constitutive link between the idea of a voluntaristic self and neoliberal discourses. Critically discussing

consumerism and the neoliberal imperative of choice, Cronin (2000: 277) argues that the ‘ideal of the voluntaristic will of the individual is paradoxically framed through “compulsory individuality”’. Drawing on Butler’s (1993) performativity theory, Cronin conceptualizes ‘choice’ as a performative enactment of self, a self which is constituted through reiterative series of self-realising acts.

While Carrie does not use the vocabulary of choice, her stress on individual strength is equally neoliberal through its association with autonomy and personal responsibility. Carrie’s statement and repetitive use of individual strength can be recast as a performative act which produces a responsible ‘self’ that rejects feminism as undesirable. Carrie’s allusion to political protest and collective organising through the term ‘rioting’ suggests that feminism is repudiated as something that potentially threatens her positioning as an autonomous and strong young woman. The performative enactment of a responsible, autonomous self also transpires through Miranda’s statement about being in favour of cosmetic surgery and her investment in controlling her weight self-reliantly and responsibly. Indeed, the repetition of the self-realising individual across the interviews is itself an example of reiteration that serves to naturalise and establish the individual, rather than the collective, as having ultimate responsibility for her own fate. Through the process of responsible individualisation, feminism is pushed away from a performatively produced self that is self-responsible, autonomous and in no need of collective political struggle.

Constructing and othering the Muslim woman

While un-gendered and responsible individualisation contributed to the perception of feminism as a spent force and an undesirable political stance in contemporary western democracies, other cultures and parts of the world were frequently portrayed as being in need of feminist politics. In particular, these discourses constructed and reiterated the trope of

‘Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression’ (Mahmood, 2005: 7; Lewis, 2006; Razack, 2004). This construction reflects the tendency to regard Muslim women as passive victims who are ‘veiled, exotic and oppressed by Islam’ (Khan, 2005: 2023-2024). Talking specifically about Britain, Alexander (2000: 6) has characterised the ‘reification of Islam as one of the key markers of difference in contemporary British racial discourse’. Similarly, in the German cultural imaginary, the Turkish/Muslim other tends to be depicted as ‘traditional’, and stigmatised as belonging to a community oppressed by patriarchal and Islamic structures (Ha, 2004).

In the context of feminist dis-identification, the trope of the “oppressed Muslim woman” figures as yet another site for the disarticulation of feminism. The construction of Muslim women as powerless victims of patriarchy facilitates the repudiation of feminism as unnecessary in western countries. When I asked Vicky whether she could imagine campaigning for women’s issues, she replied: ‘Well, the thing – it’s difficult living in England or well, western Europe where it’s – we’ve reached such a high level of kind of democratic connotation and values already. Like if – if I was in the Middle East, er, then obviously I would’. Vicky rejects the need for feminist campaigning in western Europe by portraying its gender regime as progressive. As Edley and Wetherell (2001: 450) have pointed out, ‘[t]his “progressive” view of history is a common frame of reference in which society is seen as moving from a state of relative ignorance, barbarism and injustice towards increased enlightenment and civilization’. This account of historical change as automatically moving towards more egalitarian structures implies the inevitability of society’s progress, thereby undoing the need for social movements. Vicky’s claim that she would ‘obviously’ campaign for women’s rights if she were in the Middle East establishes a dichotomy between the west as egalitarian, and non-western countries as in definite need of feminist activism.

As Khan (2005: 2027) points out, constructions of, and comparisons between, the west as progressive and liberated and the rest as oppressive and traditional, ‘make it easier for women in the west to believe that they are not oppressed and make critiques of the violence and other forms of structural inequalities they face more difficult to get across’. The juxtaposition between the west and the rest is frequently coded in terms of gender and the granting of sexual freedoms (McRobbie, 2009; Pedwell, 2010). It disarticulates the need for feminism in places like Germany and Britain because its dichotomous construction relies on the characterisation of western countries as liberated and free. In sharing her experiences of spending time in Turkey, Leila claimed that ‘women have many more advantages here in Germany than they do in Turkey, because here you don’t make such strong distinctions, like in Turkey for example’. Germany and Turkey are placed at extreme ends of the continuum of gender (in)equality, thereby establishing a binary of “patriarchal Turkey” and “liberated Germany”.

On the one hand, the exploration of the participants’ negative portrayal of gender relations in the Muslim world offers a more complex picture of their relationship with feminism as it suggests that they recognise the benefits that they reap from its achievements. On the other hand, however, this discourse of the liberated west and the oppressed (Muslim) rest works in very similar ways to processes of individualisation in that both discursive practices create a distance between oneself and feminism. Individualising and othering discourses uncouple feminism from one’s experiences – either through the individualisation of narratives or the literal displacement of feminism away from the self and to ‘other countries’ and/or communities.

One statement that combined individualist rhetoric and the attribution of gender inequalities to the Muslim world was made by Miranda: ‘I have never come across anything that made me upset about anything the way that a woman is treated, obviously I hear these

things about, on TV, and about how, some Muslim women for instance are treated, and I think that's very wrong'. Miranda disarticulates the need for feminism both by using an individualist discourse – she has never experienced discrimination – and by attributing the experience of gender oppression to 'Muslim women'. Similar to Vicky, Miranda 'obviously' hears about the treatment of 'some Muslim women' which she finds 'very wrong'. As opposed to her emphasis on never having encountered discrimination herself, her language becomes unambiguous and political by using the terms 'very wrong'. The juxtaposition between her experiences and those of 'some Muslim women' is thus reinforced on the level of language itself. Through the portrayal of the treatment of other women as 'very wrong', Miranda further expresses an allegiance to broader notions of equality. As opposed to the un-gendered narratives of the participants' own experiences, Miranda talks about Muslim 'women' and her account acquires an explicitly gendered dimension. The trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" allows Miranda to reject feminism as irrelevant to her life. Simultaneously, it functions as a face-saving device which enables Miranda to portray herself as a supporter of gender equality. On a discursive level, "the oppressed Muslim woman" steps in to carry the burden of oppression in order to allow for Miranda to disarticulate feminist perspectives as superfluous in Britain.

McRobbie (2009) argues that this disarticulation process has become more sustained since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, pre-empting the formation of critical solidarities amongst women from a range of backgrounds and displacing possible post-colonial criticisms of the construction of the west as progressive. Indeed, the discourse on patriarchal Islam can be cast as neo-colonial because it reinstates colonial modes of talking about and knowing the other. Mahmood (2005: 189 - 190) argues that 'colonialism rationalized itself on the basis of the "inferiority" of non-western cultures, most manifest in their patriarchal customs and practices, from which indigenous women had to be rescued

through the agency of colonial rule'. The call for the rescuing of indigenous women appeared in Carrie's interview. She talked about female genital cutting and argued that western feminists should concentrate on Muslim women.

The trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" is particularly powerful because it constructs the very object it speaks about, thereby (re)producing a regime of truth about the other (Spivak, 1988). In Vicky's (and also Miranda's) statements, the 'Middle East' is knowable to the western subject: women's oppression is so obvious in these parts of the world that she would of course campaign for women's rights. As Yeğenoğlu (1998: 90) contends, the force of such a statement stems from '[...] its power to construct the very object it speaks about and from its power to produce a regime of truth about the other and thereby establish the identity and the power of the subject that speaks about it [...]'. Statements that produce knowledge about the other – in this context the "oppressed Muslim woman" – are implicated in the (re)production of western authority because they construct knowledge exclusively from a western point of view. In critically analysing statements about Islamic cultures and countries as patriarchal, it is not my intention to argue that there are no gender inequalities in the Muslim world. Instead, I aim to demonstrate how the "oppressed Muslim woman" is constructed in talk and that the othering of Muslim women works to disarticulate feminism. This is problematic because it produces the western subject as the knower and the non-western woman as oppressed.

Crucially, the trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" is intertwined with the construction of "western empowered selves". Following Said (1985), Frankenberg (1993: 16, emphasis in original) suggests that the '[...] Western self is itself produced as *an effect of* the Western discursive production of its Others'. In the context of feminist dis-identification, the construction of the "oppressed Muslim other" by women who live in Europe produces a liberated self that is not in need of feminism. Through knowing and naming its other, the

western self gets constructed as that which is not its other: if the Muslim woman is oppressed and a victim of patriarchal power, the western woman is liberated and free from gender constraints. Analogous to processes of individualisation that position young women as responsible, active and choosing individuals who reject feminism as a collective politics, the trope of the “oppressed Muslim woman” creates subject positions for young western women as not being in need of feminism. The construction of liberated versus oppressed women is central to the production of an empowered western self through its non-western other.

The theme of women’s oppression in other parts of the world establishes a static model of two homogenous entities, thereby failing to allow for differences and hierarchies both within the west and those countries designated as other. Gender relations in Islamic countries and communities are coded as ‘obviously’ discriminatory and oppressive, disregarding hierarchies amongst indigenous women (Khan, 2005) and ignoring intra-group differences (Griffin and Braidotti, 2002). Crucially, the dichotomous construction of the free west versus repressive parts of the world (whose boundaries are absolute) essentialises and reifies culture as an all determining structuring force. This approach to culture, argues Alexander (1996: 14), ‘leads ultimately to the reification of absolutist notions of cultural authenticity, which in turn re-inscribe new racist ideologies of essential cultural difference’. In several participants’ accounts, culture – when discussed in relation to difference – figured as a determining force. Discussing gender relations and cultural difference, Callie said:

Because people from different cultures still erm, if you were to walk down a road you’d find families where the woman was still you know, had to - to stand in the kitchen all day and do the, and the men went off. Erm, yeah. I think – I think culture has a lot to do with it, the different cultures. Obviously I’ve been brought up in erm...you know, a British culture er, and – but not- even people that you know, live locally er, their - their values and their outlook on life’s totally different still.

Callie describes seemingly backwards gender relations where the women ‘still’ has ‘to stand in the kitchen all day’, arguing that ‘culture has a lot to do with it’. Culture and cultural difference figure as the central explanation for ‘traditional’ forms of behaviour and are set

apart from social progress through the repetitive use of the word ‘still’. Callie’s, but also Vicky’s statements above suggest that there is a temporal difference between the west and the Muslim world with regards to feminism. While feminism is a thing of the past in the west, it ‘still’ has not reached the Muslim world. It seems that these cultures are ‘still’ backwards when compared to the British culture which Callie has ‘obviously’ been raised in. The word ‘obviously’ appears again, reinforcing the juxtaposition between cultures that are depicted as traditional and British culture that is portrayed as ‘obviously’ different in this respect. Callie’s statement draws on and reproduces the notion of cultural difference and of culture as determining people’s values and habits.

This essentialist view of culture as a determining principle stands in stark contrast to the individualism prevalent in the interviews. Culture is essentialised and reified only in discussions of cultural difference, producing an image of western culture as fluid and other cultures as deterministic. Observing that culture has become an object of tolerance and intolerance in recent years, Brown (2006: 151) provides a fascinating analysis of the contrasting views on culture in the context of liberal democracies on the one hand, and ‘other’, supposedly repressive, regimes on the other hand: “‘we’ *have* culture while they *are* a culture’ (emphasis in original). Brown sees the liberal emphasis on moral autonomy as crucial to the attribution of culture-as-dominance to others. While autonomous liberal subjects are able to step in and out of culture, to ‘have’ culture, their others are governed by culture.

For the organicist creature, considered to lack rationality and will, culture and religion (culture *as* religion, and religion *as* culture – equations that work only for this creature) are saturating and authoritative; for the liberal one, in contrast, culture and religion become “background”, can be “entered” and “exited”, and are thus rendered extrinsic to rather than constitutive of the subject (Brown, 2006: 153; emphasis in original).

Culture as power and rule is attributed to others, helping to stabilise the fiction of the autonomous individual on the one hand, and its oppressed opposite on the other.

In highlighting the constitutive link between autonomy and culture-as-mere-way-of-life, or oppression and culture-as-power-and-rule, Brown's analysis sheds light on the function that the trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" fulfils in the talk of the interviewees. While the respondents present themselves overwhelmingly as empowered subjects who are freed from structural constraints, their other is regarded as an oppressed victim of cultural domination. Gender inequality and discrimination are relentlessly individualised and purged from the research participants' accounts about their own experiences. By contrast, patriarchal oppression becomes the defining principle in talk about other cultures whose traditions determine their members' views and behaviours. The interviewees portray themselves as empowered and free bearers of social change, taking up a subject position whose intelligibility depends on their cultural other that is said to suffer from a lack of agency. The theme of the "oppressed Muslim woman" stabilises the respondents' positioning as free and emancipated, playing a vital role in the repudiation of feminism as unnecessary to their lives in contemporary western democracies. Consequently, the figure of the female victim of the patriarchal gender regime is interlinked with and constitutive of the un-gendered and responsible individualism prevalent in the interviews. In being the other of the autonomous, empowered young western women, the "oppressed Muslim woman" stabilises the positioning of the research participants as subjects of social change.

Conclusion

Individualism and neoliberalism shape subject positions for young women that are seemingly irreconcilable with forms of collective organising frequently associated with feminist politics. Analysing young women's engagements with feminism, this article has demonstrated that feminism is disarticulated through the processes of un-gendered and responsible individualisation and the othering of Muslim women. Feminism, I have shown, is disavowed in favour of a pronounced individualism that relies on processes of distancing: from an understanding of the significance of gender, from feminism as a collective political movement, and from the oppression of Muslim women. As the last section of this article has demonstrated, the powerless and dominated woman represents a marginalised figure in young women's talk about feminism. However, she plays a central role in young women's self-presentation as emancipated and free by facilitating the disarticulation of feminism and its re-direction away from the self to "other" parts of society and the world.

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ⁱ All names have been changed and translations from German into English are mine.

ⁱⁱ Numerous research participants associated feminism with lesbianism, which points to the dimensions of sexuality and heteronormativity in negotiations of feminism (see Author, 2011).